

REVIEW OF *TECHNOLOGY-MEDIATED TBLT: RESEARCHING TECHNOLOGY AND TASKS*

Technology-mediated TBLT: Researching Technology and Tasks

Marta González-Lloret and Lourdes Ortega

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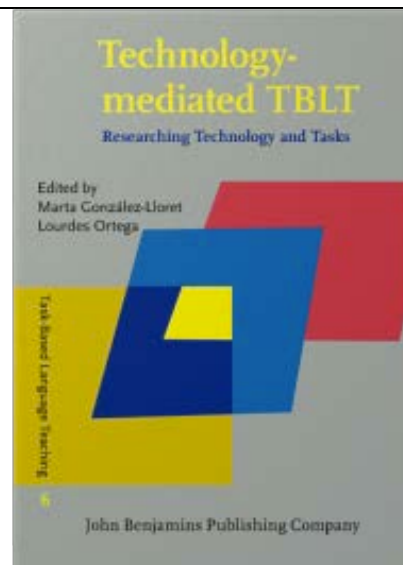
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Technology-mediated TBLT: Researching Technology and Tasks, edited by Marta González-Lloret and Lourdes Ortega, presents a new framework in which tasks and technology are integrated in the language curriculum. Although Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) have been around for some time, the integration of language learning tasks and new technologies has remained an under-researched area, as pointed out by the editors. The current volume offers several empirical studies as well as a theoretical framework, which is likely to be a welcome contribution to research and to teaching practice.

The book is divided into twelve chapters of varying lengths and foci. In the introductory chapter, the editors present their vision for how “the canonical principles of task-based language teaching (TBLT) can be fitted integrally into the new language education and digital technology realities” (p. 1). They propose three requirements that they believe will assist in this process of integration: (a) to work with a TBLT-informed definition of tasks, (b) to be cognizant of the implications the integration brings about for the construction of knowledge as well as for any kind of learning (which of course includes language learning), and (c) to bring the curriculum into the forefront. They highlight the three cornerstones of traditional TBLT (needs analysis; task selection and sequencing; materials development and instructional design) and add a fourth component that they argue should be equally important (assessment of learners’ learning processes and learning outcomes). It is a promising start that is likely to heighten readers’ curiosity. Whereas many of these contributions focus on empirical studies that are linked in different ways to technology-mediated TBLT, others are more theoretically oriented, or illustrate possible future paths for research into technology-mediated TBLT.

Chapter 2, by González-Lloret, is about the necessity for needs analyses (NA) in technology-mediated TBLT. She highlights the importance for language teachers to consider which technologies will mediate (and hence transform) the task at hand. While it is crucial to conduct NAs, she also discusses the possible challenges of conducting such analyses, which might in fact explain why there are so few concrete examples of NAs for TBLT programs. One challenge mentioned is the fact that teachers may trust textbooks to offer the necessary material and, as a consequence, they stop worrying about their specific

language program or learners. González-Lloret also addresses the importance of attending to learners' digital literacies and argues that while most young learners are relatively computer and multimedia literate, their skills may vary greatly across settings and populations.

Chapter 3 (by Adams and Nik) deals with prior knowledge and second language task production in group text chat among engineering students in Malaysia. It is an impressive chapter that includes a solid theoretical background, useful reports on previous studies, and a study on the quality of predictions of the Cognition Hypothesis (Robinson, 2005) in chat tasks. In the study, a so-called resource-dispersing variable – prior knowledge – is investigated, to see whether it impacts language production. The results failed to provide evidence for the applicability of the Cognition Hypothesis to the type of data examined, and the authors suggest that, “it is the distinct nature of text chat that best explains these findings” (p. 72). In text chat, production and transmission of messages are separated, so that production happens first (as learners compose and edit their posts), whereas transmission takes place later (when the message has been posted). This separation leaves room for learners to focus on form when they are off-line, which may enhance the accuracy and complexity of their linguistic output “under less cognitively complex conditions of task performance” (p. 72). The findings of rather advanced inferential statistics are communicated in a reader-friendly way that can be understood by readers with varying degrees of familiarity with higher-order statistical procedures.

In Chapter 4, Solares reports on an action research study in a textbook-bound EFL context. The author was the teacher-researcher in this Mexican study whose aim was to investigate the educational value of blending technology into a task-based instruction module that targets grammar learning (simple past; past continuous; *used to*). The whole module culminated in a writing activity. Three groups were examined: the first group engaged in a task-based, technology-mediated instructional design, the second experienced the same design but without digital tools, and the third worked in line with the original textbook design. Questionnaires and interviews were used to collect the data. While all three approaches led to similar linguistic gains, the first two groups appreciated the task design more than the technological element. As noted by the author, although a researcher-teacher design is typical of action research, it has the disadvantage that it may introduce inadvertent bias into studies. I appreciate that she brings this up, because many student comments were easy to predict. In addition, the PostScript encompasses details of Solares's further-developed technology-mediated teaching, which provides valuable information to instructors.

Chapter 5 (Oskoz and Elola) centers on a study targeting collaborative writing through the use of Web 2.0 tools and tasks. The participants were advanced-level Spanish majors at an American university who completed two writing modules (argumentative and expository essays). A task-based approach was used for each genre, and the students used chats and wikis for each essay. The researchers set out to analyze the extent to which a task-based approach to collaborative writing – combined with the use of chats and wikis – would aid learners in developing their writing competencies. The results revealed that content was focused in both modules. Further, macro language aspects were more focused in the chats than in the wikis, whereas the opposite relationship was found for micro language aspects. The evidence supports the sociocultural theoretical view that learners' interactions, here manifest in Web 2.0 tools, mediated the collaborative writing activity. However, this was a small study, and the authors acknowledge the difficulty of knowing whether there were indeed developmental explanations to their findings (learner productions became more advanced over time) or rather a tradeoff effect (learners used less complex grammatical structures in the second, expository essay). It seems clear, though, that the carefully sequenced set of tasks that guided the learners through the writing processes assisted them in reaching high levels of critical thinking, which is in line with findings in Ware and O'Dowd (2008).

In Chapter 6, Sykes returns to her well-known synthetic immersive environment (SIE) called *Croquelandia*, created specifically for the learning of L2 pragmatics in Spanish. The study is based on in-game data and interviews with college-level learners in the U.S. Sykes examines students' restarts of

tasks, or more specifically, the notion of *fail states* as evidenced through quest restarts, which is “one critical component of TBLT in SIEs” (p. 154). These fail states allow for a continued repetition of tasks, leaving it up to each student/player to decide on the number of repetitions needed in order to successfully complete a quest. ‘Task’ in this context is defined as “a real-world, authentic activity which prepares learners for, and engages learners with, meaningful language use” (p. 152) – a definition that most contributors in this volume seem to adhere to. The results were slightly disappointing in that only half of the participants produced quest restarts; the remaining half never made any use at all of the in-game restart feature (built into the game for the purpose of language learning). In addition, out of those who used the restart feature, the majority only did so once. There is an important discussion at the end about the difference between playing to learn (players complete tasks in order to learn something) and learning to play (tasks are more than mere practice; they are the authentic reason for needing to learn to do something).

Chapter 7 (authored by Canto, de Graaff, and Jauregi) is about collaborative tasks for negotiation of intercultural meaning in virtual worlds (e.g., *Second Life*) and video-web communication (e.g., Adobe Connect), and stems from the European Networked Interaction in Foreign Language Acquisition and Research project (NIFLAR). Both virtual worlds and video-web communication may create opportunities for language learners to synchronously interact outside the classroom. Here, networked synchronous interactions of two triads (two L1 Dutch students of Spanish; one L1 Spanish pre-service teacher in Spain) were examined, along with questionnaire data from students and pre-service teachers. The findings were positive: both learners and pre-service teachers became more aware of intercultural differences and similarities, so the setup clearly contributed to mutually beneficial experiences. In addition, this type of computer-mediated communication gives opportunities for real interaction, indeed a good basis for L2 learning.

The following chapter (Gánem-Gutiérrez) describes a theoretical framework informed by Sociocultural Theory (SCT) and Activity Theory supposed to be used for the design and evaluation of pedagogical tasks for 3D virtual environments. Although I would have appreciated a heavier focus on tasks, the chapter is still interesting and includes a useful, detailed table comparing SCT principles and 3D virtual world affordances for TBLT.

In Chapter 9, Sauro explores the use of fandoms and fandom tasks as pedagogical tools in technology-enhanced language classes. In online fandoms, users appropriate both emerging and established technologies, and they do so in order to analyze and/or produce creative works based upon source material such as J. K. Rowling’s books about *Harry Potter*. Sauro guides readers through four fandom tasks and the technology applications used for each one. The tasks are organized in the order of technical complexity of the applications involved, and she explores the linguistic skills and proficiency levels targeted by each task. Technical and linguistic complexity goes hand in hand; for instance, so-called threaded games are basic in terms of technical complexity and beginning/intermediate in terms of linguistic complexity and are, thus, described first. At the advanced level, Wikis and literary lexicons are described. All of this is done in a pedagogical fashion, which makes the chapter accessible and inspiring. Anyone teaching comparative literature or writing classes would be keen to try some of the suggested tasks, perhaps even incorporating them into their curriculum.

Chapter 10 (Winke) reports on a project that takes place among advanced level Chinese learners in the U.S. The aim was to introduce task-based, formative assessments of spoken language, designed by the author to aid students in monitoring the development of their own oral proficiency skills. After the author/researcher had teamed up with the students’ teacher, the students contributed with self-assessments (of accuracy, fluency, complexity, and accent/tones), which were then compared with expert raters’ assessments on two tasks. With the help of formative assessment, the purpose was to enable learners to recognize their own learning trajectory, so that major achievements did not pass by unnoticed. During the course of the study, the learners became better and more realistic judges of their own oral production. The

chapter offers an enjoyable reading experience and, as in many other chapters, provides valuable suggestions for further research.

In chapter 11, Nielson also targets learning Chinese, but in this study the participants were high school students who wanted to continue their studies after having taken part in a summer program. The learners comprised two groups: the first ($n = 35$) completed a yearlong, task-based online course, and the second (control, $n = 12$) did not participate in the online format but completed pre- and post-course testing. The aim was to examine the effectiveness of this specific course. While the results indicate that learner proficiency improved after the online version of the program, it was not possible to conclude that the improvements resulted from the online course per se; the small sample sizes in combination with low assessment completion rates precluded any significance testing. Nevertheless, this research constitutes a valuable contribution to both online teaching and TBLT. For anyone teaching online classes, this chapter offers particularly interesting theory and findings.

It is a great choice to have Chapelle writing the Afterword, since she made important, early contributions in the field of CALL and TBLT. In the afterword, she uses the chance to comment on developments and future directions. Her chapter sums up the book, highlights gaps in the field, and identifies challenges, among which include the redefinition of target language competence and the identification of real world tasks in the context of emerging new technologies across learning contexts.

Overall, *Technology-mediated TBLT* comes across as a timely contribution in that it presents a new theoretical framework, brings together scholars from all over the world, and encompasses several languages. Strangely enough, the cover material specifies that the contexts of study span “adult college-level education settings”, but I would like to stress that there are also highly relevant contributions from secondary school settings in this book. The mix of tasks and technologies, of languages and educational levels, and of theory and empirical studies could easily run the risk of creating a chaotic impression, but that is certainly not the case in this volume. On the contrary, *Technology-mediated TBLT* is an easily accessible and enjoyable read, and the editors have made excellent choices when selecting the chapters. For me, it was slightly bewildering that the phrases *pedagogic task* and *pedagogical task* were used inconsistently throughout the book, but this is a very minor complaint. On the whole, there are few formal mistakes, which indicate a careful editing process. While the scientific quality varies across chapters, most are relevant and strong pieces, in particular Chapters 5, 7, 9, and 11. Most likely, many teachers and researchers involved in CALL and/or TBLT will find this book both useful and inspiring.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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